Tool handles are available with varying designs relative to diameter, attachment angles, coatings (anti-slip), contouring (finger grips), coverings (rubber cushioning), etc., that fit individuals better. Test tools before buying.

- Grasp, don’t pinch tools, pots, etc. (Figure 4).
- Use a drip irrigation system to alleviate the need to drag hoses and sprinklers around the yard, reducing the strain on joints.
- Request exercises from your doctor to build up shoulder, mid-back and other muscles that may weaken when activities concentrate on other muscles. Also do conditioning exercises that strengthen the hand and arm muscles.

Using these techniques, many of the activities of gardening that can cause or aggravate carpal tunnel syndrome can be avoided.

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For more information on selection, planting, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension Office. If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your Extension agent about becoming an Extension Master Gardener. For bimonthly gardening information, subscribe to The Virginia Gardener Newsletter by sending your name and address and a check for $5.00 made out to “Treasurer, Va. Tech” to The Virginia Gardener, Department of Horticulture, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0349. Horticultural information is also now available on the Internet by connecting with Virginia Cooperative Extension at http://www.ext.vt.edu.
Gardening with carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) can be very difficult, especially when a long day of shoveling, raking, or weed pulling leaves you with a painful or “tingling” hand or wrist. These aches and pains are often caused in part by improper techniques or tools used in gardening.

Repetitive motion injuries such as CTS result from performing a task or motion repeatedly without giving the body time to rest, recover and repair from the activity. These injuries may also be increased by awkward positions or postures, vibration, and using hands to pound or push on things.

With carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive wrist and/or finger movements out of the neutral position (the slightly upward bent position where the least amount of strain is put on the wrist) can lead to injury. The injury occurs in the carpal tunnel (the area composed of small bones and an encircling ligament at the base of the hand) (Figure 1). Flexor tendons (the tendons that generate finger movement) and/or the synovium (the lining of the carpal tunnel) become swollen and inflamed. These inflamed tendons then press against other body parts in the carpal tunnel, quite frequently against the median nerve.

The median nerve passes through the carpal tunnel, conducting impulses from the brain down the arm to the thumb, forefinger, middle finger and half of the ring finger. When pressed, numbness and tingling may occur. Blood flow through the carpal tunnel may also be reduced, often resulting in cold fingers.

**Factors contributing to CTS while gardening**

The factors that contribute to this condition include:
- repeated wrist motions
- long periods of hand movements
- using poorly designed tools
- pounding or pushing with your hands

Women are also more prone to develop CTS than are men. In addition, CTS can be further aggravated or negatively influenced by the following conditions:
- age
- cool temperatures
- pregnancy
- rheumatoid arthritis
- diabetes
- vitamin B-6 deficiency

**Preventing Pain from CTS while Gardening**

It is possible to enjoy gardening without pain or risk of developing CTS by using the following simple techniques:
- Vary activities, and motions or tasks within those activities frequently.
- Take frequent rests from repetitive motions.
- Use the correct posture for all tasks.
- Use ergonomically designed tools that conform to your hand. Do not force your hand to adapt to poorly fitting tools (Figure 2).